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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

STATE FOR EAP/BCLTV AND DRL/IRF

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TAGS: PHUM KIRF PREL PGOV VM RELFREE HUMANR ETMIN

SUBJECT: NORTHERN PROTESTANT CHURCH OUTLINES PLANS

Reftels: A) 04 Hanoi 3257, B) 04 Hanoi 1987, C) Hanoi 353

1. (SBU) Summary: The Evangelical Church of Vietnam: North (ECVN) plans to begin renovating its churches, building new ones and appointing four pastors in the new future. In appointing the new pastors, the Church will follow the relaxed notification requirements of the new Ordinance on Religion. The Church also plans to begin publishing a newsletter and open a Bible school in Hanoi, but authorities have indicated approval for these two actions may take some time. End Summary.

2. (SBU) Pastor Au Quang Vinh (protect) of the Hanoi branch of the ECVN began his February 17 meeting with Poloff by saying that he is "very happy with our new opportunities this year." On February 4, the Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA) had accepted the new leadership board of the ECVN, elected at their general convention last December (Ref. A), and the ECVN and CRA had finally settled their lingering disagreements about the Church's charter. The CRA did not try to change any tenets of faith in the Church charter, but did push for some modifications in the ECVN's organizational structure. For example, the CRA did not want the ECVN to register "sub-congregations without church buildings," but the Church insisted that this was an important part of their outreach to ethnic minority Christians in the Northwest Highlands. "We kept 99 percent of the major points," said Vinh, but made some changes in language to placate the CRA."

2. (SBU) Pastor Vinh presented Poloff with a letter in English that listed eight "works" the Church plans to carry out. These are (quote):

- Existing local churches must try their best to be self sufficient;
- Strengthen the relationship between old local churches and newly built ones;
- Build new churches and repair old ones that [were] damaged by war;
- Ordain and appoint new pastors to local churches that have no leaders;
- Create a Bible School to train and produce enough religious leaders and workers;
- Recognize qualified churches of the mountainous tribes;
- Editing and publishing Christian literature;
- and Encourage local churches to be involved in social and charitable works and especially tighten the relationship between North and South VN Churches which are so far operating as two different organizations because of the present law system. (End quote)

3. (SBU) Pastor Vinh indicated that the ECVN leadership's first planned activity is to travel "next week" to Thanh Hoa and Nghe An Provinces. In Thanh Hoa, the ECVN will seek permission to reconstruct a dilapidated church. In Vinh, capital of Nghe An, the church had been seized by the provincial government several years ago and, four years ago, the building was razed to construct a park. The ECVN will seek an apology for this and ask the authorities to provide them with new land for and aid in constructing a new church.

4. (SBU) Pastor Vinh indicated that the ECVN would appoint or transfer four new pastors in March. This will be a test case as it is the first time the ECVN will simply inform authorities of the transfer, rather than ask permission. This is a new freedom allowed under the new Ordinance on Religion (Ref. B). Also that month, the ECVN leadership will travel to Lang Son Province to meet with authorities about constructing a church for the ethnic minority Dzao congregation there. "We will really test whether the Government is serious about its new policies towards Protestants," Vinh said.

5. (SBU) The ECVN has already consulted with the CRA about two other issues. The Church would like to begin publishing an internal newsletter. The CRA said it would likely take six months for it to get all the government permissions required. The ECVN also consulted with the CRA about its plans to establish a Bible school in Hanoi. The Church would like the school to open this summer, but the CRA indicated that necessary approvals "may take some time," Pastor Vinh recounted.

16. (SBU) Responding to Poloff about the ECVN's plans in the Northwest Highlands, Vinh referenced the Prime Minister's Instruction on Protestants (Ref. C), saying that the document for the first time acknowledges the existence of Protestants in the region and bans forced renunciations of faith. The ECVN will continue to train actively volunteers from the Northwest Highlands so they understand their rights. (Pastor Vinh's comments on the new instruction are covered septel).

MARINE